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HISTORIC SPOTS IN WISCONSIN

W. A. TITUS

V. THE BATTLE OF THE BAD AXE

Yet haply all around lie strewed
The ashes of that multitude;
It may be that each day we tread
Where thus devoted hearts have bled.—*Hemans*.

After the skirmish at Wisconsin Heights, Black Hawk found it necessary to lead his followers through the unbroken wilderness from the west bank of the Wisconsin to the Mississippi, a region as little known to white men at that time as is the interior of Brazil today. The chieftain knew that he could not afford to lose any time in reaching the Mississippi. The Indians were without food, and the troops were as illy equipped for the pursuit. The latter accordingly left the trail for a time and marched southward to the post at Blue Mounds for a supply of provisions. It was not until July 28 that the pursuing army, now fully equipped and provisioned, crossed the Wisconsin on rafts at Helena where the old shot tower was being built. The troops pushed north about five miles through the wilderness where the trail of the fugitives was picked up. It led almost due west, and, although a week old, it was not difficult to follow. The course led over steep hills and oozy marshes, with tangled thickets and swiftly flowing streams to make progress more difficult; but there were many evidences that the savages were becoming travel-worn and losing time, and, therefore, the soldiers were urged to greater effort. Many dead savages were found beside the long trail, some of whom had died from wounds received at Wisconsin Heights, while others had succumbed to fatigue and starvation. Each hour brought the troops nearer to the enemy, as the soldiers were well mounted, while many



THE BATTLEFIELD OF BAD AXE
From an oil painting in the Wisconsin Historical Museum

of the Indians were on foot. This delayed the whole band of natives as the laggards could not be abandoned to certain death and mutilation at the hands of the whites.

On August 1 Black Hawk and his followers reached the Mississippi at a point several miles below the mouth of the Bad Axe River; the troops did not arrive until the next day. This would have given the Sauk band plenty of time to cross to the west side in safety but for two fatal incidents. There were only a few canoes available, which necessarily made the crossing slow. A hastily constructed raft was loaded with women and children and started on its way to the west bank, but for some reason it went to pieces, and nearly all of its occupants were drowned. The second misfortune was even more tragic. About three o'clock in the afternoon of the same day, while the Sauk warriors were gathered near the shore to await the return of the canoes that were so slowly carrying the party across the river, the government steamer *Warrior* appeared and ran in close to the east bank. Black Hawk stepped forward and held up a white flag, shouting, as he did so, that his followers wished to surrender. By a misunderstanding or a willful ignoring of the signal three rounds of cannister were fired from the vessel directly into the group of Indians. This was followed by a heavy rifle fire from both sides; but the slaughter of the Sauk, bunched together on the shore and without any cover, was easy work for the twenty-one soldiers on board the steamer. Twenty-seven warriors were killed in this skirmish on the river bank. The *Warrior* ran out of fuel and was forced to withdraw to Prairie du Chien, forty miles below, to take on a supply of wood.

During the night more of the Sauk escaped across the river into Iowa; but Black Hawk saw that the greater number were doomed to death or captivity because the Indian runners reported that the pursuing army had arrived within a few miles of the river. He accordingly

formed his battle lines for the morrow and gave his followers close directions as to the best method for meeting the attack of the troops. Then with White Cloud, the Prophet, and a few personal attendants the old chief turned again into the wilderness and headed eastward for the Dalles of the Wisconsin near the mouth of the Lemonweir River, where some of the Winnebago had offered to hide him from the government agents.

The land troops arrived under cover of darkness. In the morning the order was given to attack the savages. Black Hawk had arranged a decoy party which, when attacked, retreated up the river with the hope of drawing the troops away from the main body of warriors. This scheme almost succeeded as most of the troops, including the regulars, followed the decoy party upstream; but a detachment of the volunteers discovered the larger group of the Sauk, which still consisted of about three hundred warriors, and attacked immediately with rifle and bayonet. The firing was heard by the troops to the north, who immediately rejoined the volunteers. The Indians fought with primal ferocity; but resistance was hopeless as the troops had all the advantage of position, and the affair was a slaughter rather than a battle. Few prisoners were taken and these were mostly women and children. The savagery of the border was exhibited in its worst form by both sides. About three hundred of the raiders had escaped across the Mississippi during the two days, but the military authorities had arranged with Wabasha, a Sioux chief, to massacre these as soon as they reached the Iowa side; and so faithfully did he execute this merciless order that no more than one hundred and fifty of the thousand who followed Black Hawk from the lower Rock River four months before ever escaped to tell the story of their long raid. The Bad Axe region has become famous in the history of savage warfare in Wisconsin. It was the scene of a skirmish with the Winnebago during their uprising in

1827, and it marked the close in 1832 of Indian troubles in Wisconsin. The little railroad station where occurred these stirring events in frontier history is called Victory, the very name suggestive of the finality of the struggle between the red man and the aggressive Anglo-Saxon.

It was mentioned that about one hundred Sauk non-combatants floated down the Wisconsin in rafts and canoes from Wisconsin Heights with the hope of escaping across the Mississippi at Prairie du Chien. These helpless creatures were met a few miles above the "Prairie" by a military force, and all were destroyed except possibly a dozen who escaped into the forest.

Black Hawk, after his flight from the ill-fated field of the Bad Axe, made good his escape to the rocky cliffs of the Lemonweir valley; but the Winnebago, who had deceived first one side and then the other, offered, for a reward, to reveal his hiding place to the white pursuers, and the old warrior was soon taken prisoner near the Dalles of the Wisconsin, a short distance north of the site of modern Kilbourn City. He was delivered to the United States authorities at Prairie du Chien and thence taken to Jefferson Barracks, and later confined in Fortress Monroe. After a brief term of imprisonment he was liberated and died at his home in southeastern Iowa in 1838.

The Black Hawk War was notable for the number of men engaged in it who later became national figures. Abraham Lincoln served with the Illinois volunteers, while Zachary Taylor and Jefferson Davis were officers in the regular army and took part in the conflict. Winfield Scott, later the hero of the Mexican War, was sent to join the forces in Wisconsin, but he did not arrive at Prairie du Chien until after the Battle of the Bad Axe. Of these four men who saw service on Wisconsin soil, two were destined to become presidents of the United States, one to be an unsuccessful candidate for the same high office, and one to become president of the southern Confederacy.